



2013 Focus Issue:  
Developing & Empowering  
Teacher Leaders

# From Teaching to Coaching

See how this author's journey proved that focusing an adult learning community on communication and collaboration can potentially increase student learning.

By Tara Zuspan

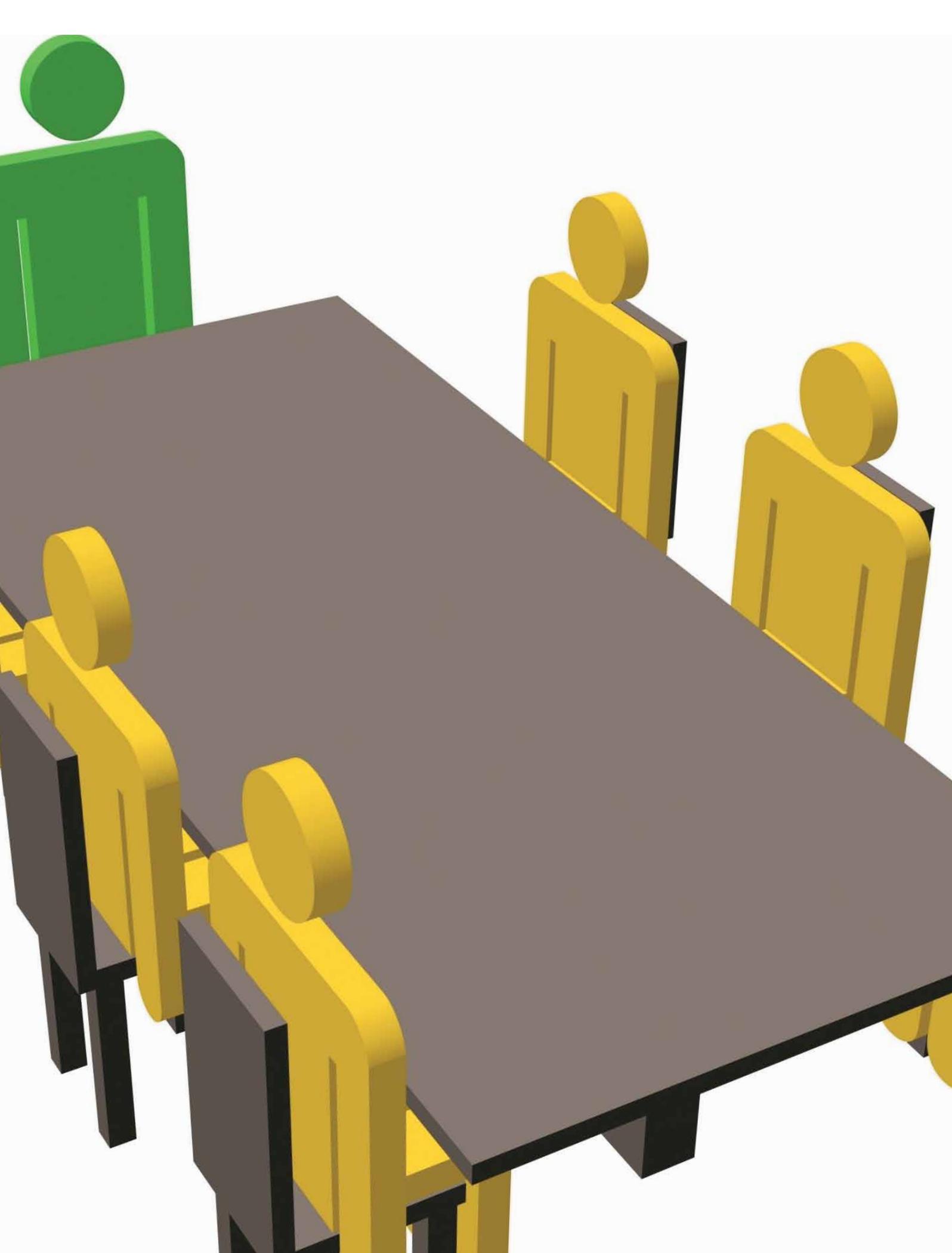
**T**he night before my first day as a coach, I had an abundance of emotions. I was anxious and uncertain about what it would be like to walk into the school as a coach and not a teacher. I knew that stepping into a leadership role in the same building where I previously taught would be a challenge, yet I had the benefit of working within the context of relationships that I had established already. Questions ran through my mind: Whose team am I on? Will teachers embrace me in this new role? What will my first day as a coach be like? Will teachers willingly collaborate with me? What will my work look like this year?

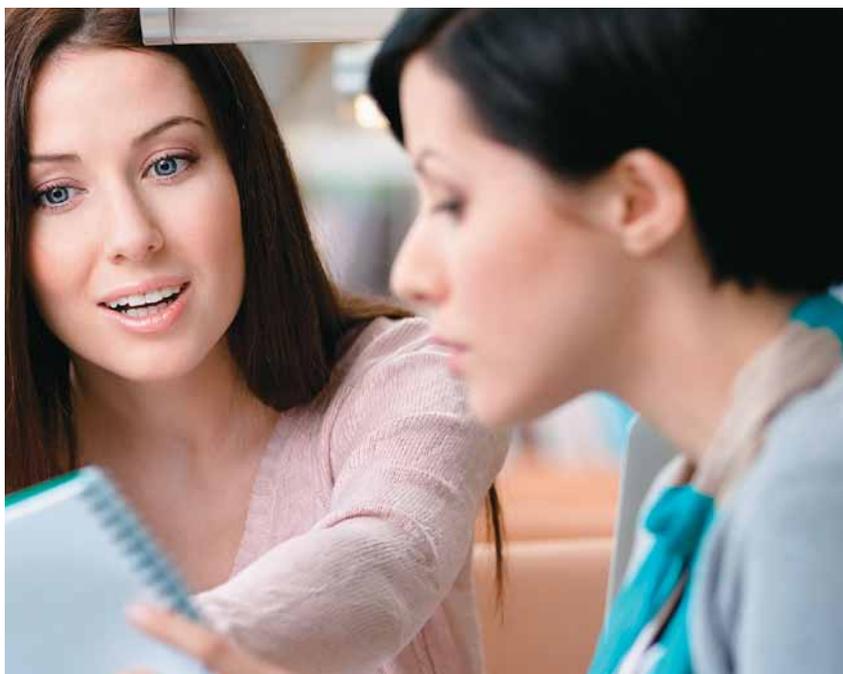
## Changing roles

In the course of my transition from classroom teacher to math instructional coach, I identified critical themes and lessons I had learned. I focused my efforts on building relationships, partnering with my principal, understanding the process of change, and providing teachers with opportunities to collaborate. These intentional efforts led to an increased frequency and intensity of communication in the building—centered on math content and pedagogy—and the potential to increase student learning.

I quickly realized that the role of a coach could make a person feel isolated and

DARREN WHITTINGHAM/THINKSTOCK





KARAMBHA PRODUCTION/VENDOR

The transition from teacher to coach can be uncertain; keeping a reflective journal provides evidence of progress over time.

lonely. On the first day back from the summer break, I walked into the staff meeting ready to find a seat. I looked around at tables full of grade-level teams. It was awkward at first, not sitting with my old team. At that moment, reality sank in that my role would still entail being part of a team, but it would be a much larger team, consisting of K–grade 2 teachers, special education teachers, administrators, school psychologists, and others. I realized I was *not* on an island by myself. I truly did belong to a new and expanded team, but much work was ahead of me in establishing myself as a leader and coach in the building.

Because of the uncertainty of how my role as a coach would unfold, I decided to document my journey daily on the basis of Woleck's (2010) recommendation that instructional coaches keep a reflective journal. My journal eventually contained reflections of coaching moments and candid emotions, including celebrations and challenges. In the process of coaching, one makes hundreds of instantaneous decisions, and when they are not documented, reflecting on those decisions over a long period of time can be challenging. My journal was a tool that enabled me to reflect a day, a week, or a month later, to make a plan and guide my next steps with teachers. When I lost confidence in the positive impact I was having on student learn-

ing, reviewing my journal revealed how my role and work had evolved, providing evidence that I was progressing as a coach.

## Building relationships

Establishing trust with teachers so they would be open to experiencing the benefits of my support was essential to effective coaching. Being genuine, listening respectfully, and communicating often were all strategies to build this trust. I also had to present myself as a collaborative colleague, clarifying that I was neither an evaluator nor an administrator.

As I began coaching, I knew much time and effort would be needed to earn trust and build relationships, but I did not anticipate the complexity of that process. I had previously established positive working relationships with teachers, but now I had more and different work to do to gain their trust as a coach. I had to help others view me as a leader in this new role.

Early in the school year, I distributed a menu (see the sidebar on p. 158) of ways I could support teachers through lesson modeling, observation, reflection, planning, and professional development. I anticipated that many teachers would participate, but during the first month, I received no requests. I had quickly forgotten just how busy teachers are, particularly at the beginning of a school year. I went to work sorting and delivering copies of the district assessment to classrooms and organizing resources such as manipulatives. These small gestures allowed teachers to view me in a positive sense as someone who was there to support them. I knew important work with teachers was in the near future, but before we could get to discussions about mathematics instruction, teachers had to perceive me as someone they could trust.

Moving forward, little did I realize how the brief one-on-one moments I spent with teachers during that first month, the informal conversations in the hallway or lounge, and my visibility in classrooms would lead to developing trusting relationships that would enable me to work with teachers toward the common goal of increasing student learning. I also found that conducting one-on-one interviews, asking questions to unpack the teacher's strengths and areas for growth, were

quite helpful. Asking, “How is the year going?” “How can I support you?” “What is working?” or “What is not working?” fueled conversations that built a foundation for our work together. A coaching request form (see the **online appendix**), conveniently located for teachers in the main office, was also an effective tool for teachers to readily communicate their needs as well as identify specific ways I could support them. This tool helped me collect data on teacher and student needs, which informed our work together throughout the year.

I began interacting with teachers who were eager and interested in working with me. Shortly thereafter, conversations about effective math instruction spread throughout the building. Gradually, more teachers partnered with me and wanted to work together. A big part of effective coach-teacher relationships is how much effort the coach puts into relationships. The 100/0 theory (Ritter 2010) is to give 100 percent and expect 0 percent in return. More often than not, the return will become 100/100. The effectiveness of math coaches and leaders is directly related to how well one can foster trusting relationships with teachers (Knight 2007), and I quickly learned this lesson. Only after I built trusting relationships with teachers did I begin to feel more effective.

I remember a moment when I was observing a teacher’s classroom. In the middle of the lesson, she asked me, “What am I trying to say? I need your help in what to do next.” I knew in that moment that our relationship was indeed built on trust, as she was willing to make herself vulnerable by asking me for help in front of her students, proving that she was not only a teacher but also a learner who was committed to her own continuous improvement. Moments like this illustrate the sustained relationships that teachers and I built, demonstrating that we developed a shared ownership for improving student learning.

### Partnering with the principal

I thought that meeting with my principal before I began my work as a coach was imperative to having common agreement on our partnership. In my building, I was the first to serve in an instructional coaching role, so it was even more critical that the role of a coach be clarified (see **fig. 1**). Some administrators



are familiar with the idea of coaching; others are not. A coach’s role might include educating the principal about coaching, effective math instruction, or current research trends. I found the following discussion questions (Hansen 2009) helpful when I met with my principal to clarify our roles.

- What are your priorities for the school year? How can I help make these happen?
- What do you believe about teaching mathematics and student learning?
- What do you want to see happening during a math lesson in your building?
- What professional development has been planned for this school year? How can I help support this plan?
- Where do you think I should start? How and when will we communicate?
- How will I log my work? What evidence do you want?

## Building-based elementary school math coach description

A math coach's primary responsibility is to promote instructional growth among teachers and increase student learning in mathematics. Responsibilities include the following:

- Support the professional growth of teachers by increasing classroom teachers' understanding of math content and pedagogy.
- Plan deep lessons—collaboratively with teams and/or individual teachers—that allow all students to reach high standards.
- Facilitate the coordination of a co-teaching model with individual teachers or teams.
- Demonstrate lesson components in teachers' classrooms.
- Observe teachers' lessons, and provide formative, feedback-structured reflection in a nonevaluative setting.
- Facilitate opportunities for teachers to develop an understanding of national, state, and district math standards and grade-level benchmarks that identify the “essential learning” in mathematics for their students.
- Assist administrative and instructional staff in interpreting and analyzing student achievement data and designing approaches to improve instruction and student learning.
- Examine student work for evidence of understanding, and use this information to make instructional decisions.
- Design, share, and deliver professional development on research-based instructional practices and strategies.

- What agreements can we make about confidentiality?

My principal wanted to be sure we had a shared understanding of effective mathematics instruction, so that when we separately met with teachers, we would encourage like practices toward a common goal. When schedules permitted, we attended professional development sessions together to support our shared vision. This gave the principal and me the opportunity to learn simultaneously and plan new initiatives for our school.

Confidentiality was also key to our effective relationship, specifically, what we could or could not discuss about individual teachers. We agreed to share only information about individual teachers if ethics rules were broken. All other information was strictly off limits. I did not want teachers to view me as the “instructional police,” voicing concerns to the principal, but rather the “instructional leader,” supporting teachers' efforts to improve their practices. My principal informed me that it

was her role to oversee whether teachers used the curriculum with fidelity. My role was to initiate authentic conversations about math content and pedagogy.

Just as teachers' workloads are ever increasing, principals' workloads are, too. The principal and I met regularly to discuss my work with teachers, sharing celebrations about students' and teachers' growth, and honestly facing obstacles or challenges that were inhibiting the work. I realized that coming to these meetings prepared with what I wanted to communicate and how to convey it concisely was essential, so that I did not take more of the principal's time than necessary. Our meetings not only kept math instruction at the forefront of the principal's packed agenda but also allowed her to become an ally I could turn to when challenges of school culture and change inhibited my work with teachers.

### Changing the culture

My belief is that coaching entails working with *all* teachers. If a coach works with only a select few, the coach may risk a negative connotation that coaches work only with teachers who need help. Everyone can learn and improve, including coaches. In fact, being in this role has taught me more about effective math instruction than when I was teaching. As a generalist elementary school teacher, my time was spread too thinly to focus deeply on all subject areas, whereas this role enabled me to study effective math practices all day, every day. Just as teachers are immersed in professional development to refine their practices, I take part in professional development as well, homing in on student learning, teacher practice, teacher development, and effective coaching practices.

Part of a coach's role is to make changes to improve student learning. Fullan stated that to initiate changes and make improvements, “reculturing is the name of the game!” (Fullan 2007, p. 41). One lofty goal I initiated was team planning. I thought this would be a simple undertaking, not realizing I was asking teachers to make an immense cultural change, from working in isolation to working collaboratively. Most teachers at my building planned for instruction in isolation, which is common in many schools (Lortie 2002). At first, teachers

resisted planning collaboratively with me. To sell the idea of collaborative planning, I shared a story about my dinner club, in which each member prepares only one dish, but enough so that everyone in the club receives a meal. At each gathering, we walk away with multiple dinners, having diligently prepared only one dish. Collaborative planning can work the same way. If each teacher on a team deeply plans one lesson and teams come together to share and discuss their plans each week, all team members can reap the benefits of multiple, deeply planned lessons.

Teachers took the risk of trying collaborative planning, although we all realized that many of us were still fearful and resistant to changing our practices. However, after gentle nudges, administrator encouragement, and intentional discussions about effective planning, we began collaboratively planning in teams one year later. Over time, teachers showed enthusiasm for collaborative work, a willingness to take risks, and a greater commitment to changing practices.

When I asked teachers to try out new ideas or strategies, I often found the following question helpful: “How do you feel about taking a risk and trying \_\_\_\_\_?” This approach sent the message that I understand that change is hard, and yet we are a *team*, taking a risk together to try something new. By raising issues in the form of a question, I avoided sending the message that I know what is best and that teachers should try it “my way.” One teacher expressed that “change doesn’t seem so hard when you do it with someone else.” Furthermore, timing is crucial. I learned that any time teachers are juggling report cards, district assessments, annual orders, or parent-teacher conferences is not an appropriate occasion to ask them to take on challenging instructional change. That I was mindful of their workloads sustained their respect for me and deepened our collaborative relationship.

As the year progressed, my work gradually moved to leading a community of adult learners with the intention of improving student learning. I began to initiate and participate with teachers in honest and challenging conversations about instruction, assessment, data analysis, and personal and professional beliefs and their impact on student learn-



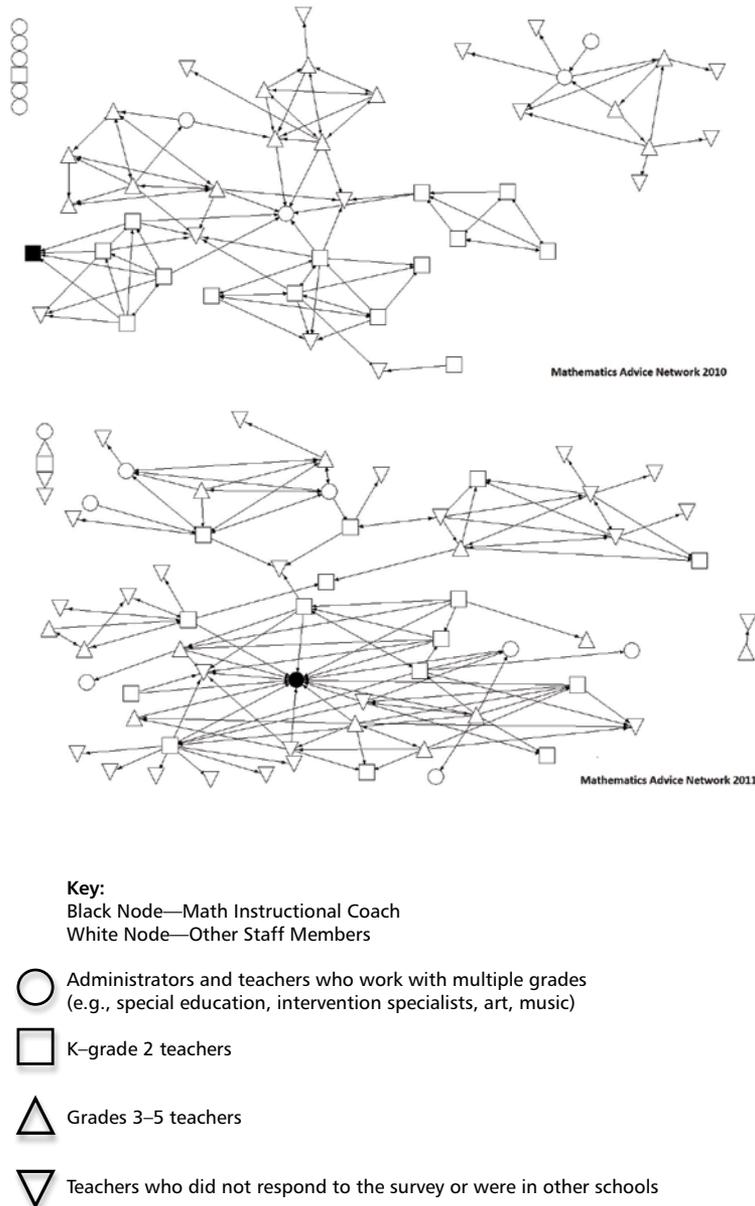
STOCKLITE/VEER

ing. Maintaining trusting relationships while doing this is not an easy task, but to improve student learning, I had to stay committed to my responsibility as a coach. I started saying no to some of the work I had done at the beginning of the school year, like making copies, organizing manipulatives, and so on, so that I could shift my focus toward work that had the greatest potential for increasing student learning. This was definitely out of my

Change can be challenging, but working with others makes change easier. The effort can result in a dynamic schoolwide shift in culture.

**FIGURE 2**

When a coach partners with the administration and builds trusting relationships with teachers, a positive coaching culture results.



comfort zone, and quite possibly for the teachers as well, but keeping my eyes on the horizon and homing in on what would positively impact student learning allowed me to persevere.

Being patient, understanding the process of change, and being sensitive to teachers' fears and resistance to change helped our teams make successful changes. Through these experiences of initiating cultural change

in a school, I came to fully understand that “change is a process, not an event” (Fullan 2007, p. 40).

### Collaborating with teachers

The teachers and I set a goal to meet regularly to plan, teach, and reflect on math lessons. “Collaboration, at its best, is a give-and-take dialogue, people working together as partners, reflecting and co-creating together” (Knight 2007, p. 28). During planning sessions, I learned much about teachers' beliefs and content knowledge. Through conversations, we developed shared visions of strategies, concepts, and skills for students as well as lesson designs. We agreed that developing similar goals for students would focus our planning sessions around mathematical ideas and pedagogy (West and Staub 2003). Our intention was to plant the seeds of habits that would grow and mature into norms of practice.

Over time, teachers began to view planning collaboratively as a benefit to their practices and, more important, a strategy for increasing student learning. One teacher stated,

I finally see why deeply planning lessons as a team is so important. Anticipating student errors, developing effective questions, and “knowing the math” helped me reach all learners.

Another teacher reported,

At first, I did not want to give up my planning time when I could quickly plan the lesson myself. After being nudged and taking a risk, I can now see benefits. I feel more confident in my math knowledge and better prepared for the students who struggle.

Collaborative planning was no longer a burden, but an aid in planning, implementing, and reflecting on practice.

My colleagues completed a survey administered by Northwest University with a focus on frequency and influence of teachers seeking advice about mathematics instruction. The sociograms in **figure 2**, noting myself as the black node, indicate an increase in interactions among the grade-level teams, other staff members, and me as the math instructional

coach from 2010 to 2011. Judging by the frequency of collaborative planning sessions and other meetings that focused on math instruction between 2010 and 2011, a shift took place: Staff members began to interact more with both their teammates and with me as the instructional math coach, and they began to seek advice and information about math content and pedagogy. The interaction patterns indicate that when a coach builds trusting relationships and partners with the administration, a positive coaching culture results. With multiple consistent opportunities to collaborate, coaching can lead to an increased frequency and intensity of the communication network focused on math content and pedagogy.

### Coaching works!

Research indicates that traditional one-stop workshops and single professional conferences are not highly effective in promoting teacher growth (Ball and Cohen 1999). A peer-coaching study in California included over eighty schools and twenty districts. When teachers were given descriptions of instructional practices at one-shot professional development sessions, only 10 percent used that skill in their classroom. However, when coaching was added as a staff development tool, about 95 percent of the teachers implemented the newly learned material (Cornett and Knight 2008).

Teachers work in an ever-changing world of reform and accountability. Keeping current can be overwhelming; the pressure to constantly improve student achievement is unrelenting. At the same time, we are expected to do more with fewer resources. Coaching has the potential to increase positive interactions among teachers regarding math content and pedagogy and support teachers as they work collaboratively to raise student achievement. My hope is that others who are considering taking the journey from teaching to coaching can benefit from the lessons I learned on my own journey as I transitioned from one role to another.

### REFERENCES

Ball, Deborah, and David Cohen. 1999. *Developing Practice, Developing Practitioners: Toward a Practice-Based Theory of Professional Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Cornett, Jake, and Jim Knight. "Instructional

Coaching: Kansas Coaching Project." Lawrence, KS: The University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning. <http://instructionalcoach.org/research>

Fullan, Michael. 2007. *Leading in a Culture of Change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hansen, Pia. 2009. *Mathematics Coaching Handbook: Working with Teachers to Improve Instruction*. Larchmont: Eye on Education.

Knight, Jim. 2007. *Instructional Coaching: A Partnership Approach to Improving Instruction*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.

Lortie, Dan. 2002. *Schoolteacher*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ritter, Al. 2010. *The 100/0 Principle: The Secret of Great Relationships*. Naperville, IL: Simple Truths.

West, Lucy, and Fritz C. Staub. 2003. *Content-Focused Coaching: Transforming Mathematics Lessons*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Woleck, Kristine Reed. 2010. *Moments in Mathematics Coaching: Improving K-5 Instruction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

*This article is based in part on the author's participation in Nebraska Math, a National Science Foundation grant to improve achievement in mathematics for all students and narrow the achievement gaps of at-risk populations. The author thanks Matt Larson, Ruth Heaton, Jim Lewis, and Susie Katt for feedback on earlier versions of this article.*

Tara Zuspan, [tzuspan@lps.org](mailto:tzuspan@lps.org), is a building math coach at Cavett Elementary in Lincoln, Nebraska, and a mathematics methods instructor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She has a passion for instructional coaching and building partnerships with teachers to increase student learning.



Download one of the free apps for your smartphone and scan this tag to access a sample coaching request form online at [www.nctm.org/tcm046](http://www.nctm.org/tcm046).

